

A Rapid Conservation Assessment and Framework for a Conservation Plan for the Plettenberg Bay Municipality



**BIODIVERSITY
CONSERVATION UNIT**

**BCU Report 2
15 January 2004**

**A rapid biodiversity conservation assessment and framework for a conservation plan for the
Plettenberg Bay Municipality, Cape Floristic Region, South Africa**

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Executive Summary

This is a report to Visi Africa Strategic Planners in support of the Spatial Development Framework for the Plettenberg Bay Municipality. The goals of this report are to: (i) provide relevant biodiversity information on the Plettenberg Bay Municipality for incorporation in its Spatial Development Framework; (2) to illustrate the distribution and conservation status of natural vegetation remnants in the Plettenberg Bay Municipality at an appropriate scale; (3) to identify potential corridors for the expansion of the Plettenberg Bay Protected Area System; (4) to illustrate the potential types of products that a comprehensive fine-scale conservation plan for the Plettenberg Bay Municipality would generate; (5) to serve as an interim conservation assessment and plan until the completion of a comprehensive fine-scale plan for the municipality.

Introduction

The Plettenberg Bay Municipality is situated in the south of the Cape Floristic Region (CFR), South Africa, and covers an area of approximately 99 114 ha (991 km²). The Cape Floristic Region, a global biodiversity hotspot, covers 87 892 km² at the southern tip of Africa. It is home to over 9 000 plant species, of which 70% are endemic (Goldblatt and Manning, 2000), and 1 406 Red Data Book plant species, the highest known concentration of rare species in the world (Cowling and Hilton-Taylor, 1994). The Plettenberg Bay Municipality is home to three of South Africa's seven biomes, those present within the municipality are fynbos, subtropical thicket and forest.

The remaining natural habitats of the Plettenberg Bay Municipality are currently being severely fragmented by alien plant infestation, cultivation, grazing and urban development. The coastal fynbos and forest vegetation types of the municipality have been identified as a conservation priority within the CFR (the CAPE Report, Phase 1 at the 1:250 000 scale, Cowling *et al.* 1999).

This rapid study addresses conservation planning in the Plettenberg Bay Municipality at a medium scale, and sought to integrate the outcomes of the CAPE and STEP conservation planning processes. The different types of land-use were mapped at the 1: 25 000 by this initiative, in order to more accurately identify the remaining natural vegetation remnants in the study area. The vegetation types used as surrogates of biodiversity pattern were those mapped at the 1:100 000 scale by the STEP Project. The final scale of this assessment therefore remains at the 1: 100 000 scale, but has resulted in improvements upon the broader scale STEP outcomes. However, in order to ensure that the heterogeneity of the biodiversity features within the Plettenberg Bay Municipality is adequately assessed, represented in a protected area system, and taken cognisance of in land-use decision-making a comprehensive fine-scale conservation assessment at a **minimum** of 1: 20 000 must be undertaken for the municipality.

This conservation assessment seeks to identify the conservation status of the remnants of natural vegetation within the Plettenberg Bay Municipality. It also serves to illustrate a number of potential corridors for the expansion of the existing protected area system within the Municipality. These corridors primarily seek to ensure the long-term functioning of important ecological processes (e.g. riverine systems) and to link existing protected areas, and secondly to conserve priority vegetation types. It must be noted that these corridors require further fine-scale planning, and the exact path these will follow is yet to be determined. For this reason the inclusion or exclusion of erven from these corridors should be treated as preliminary proposals requiring consultation with, and refinement by, the relevant landowners and conservation agencies.

Methodology

In light of the urgent need for information at the relevant scale, this rapid conservation assessment and framework for a conservation plan for the Plettenberg Bay Municipality was developed using a maximum amount of existing information.

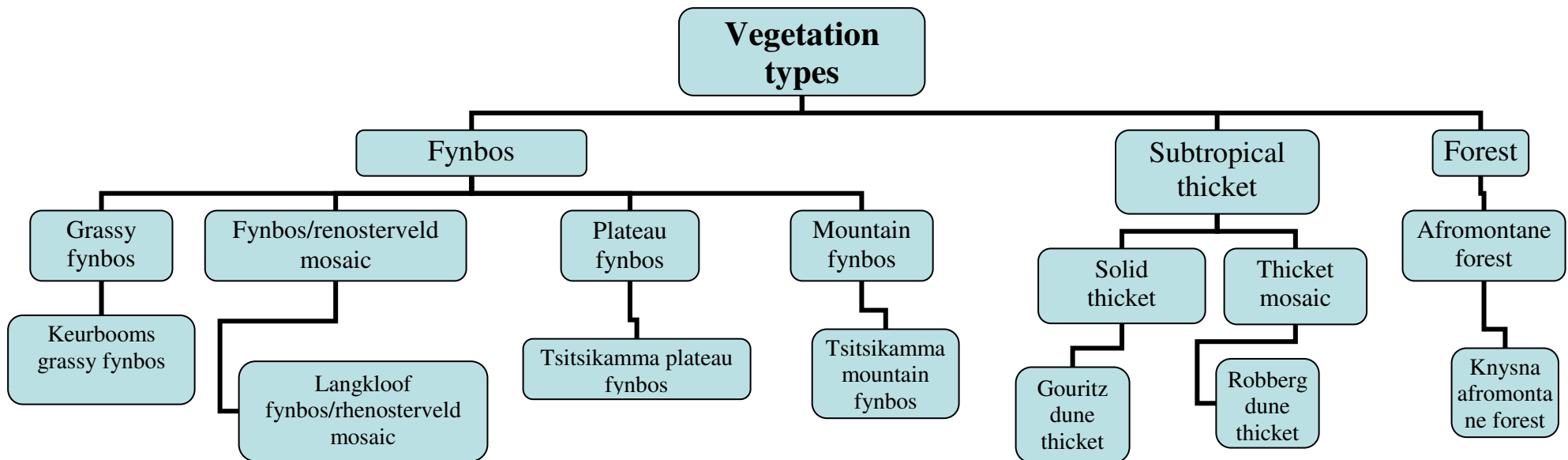
The STEP (Subtropical Thicket Ecosystem Planning) Project developed a conservation plan for the subtropical thicket vegetation found east of the Duiwenhoks River and west of the Great Kei River. The STEP conservation plan was developed at the 1: 250 000 scale. However, the vegetation and protected area system maps for the STEP planning domain were developed at the 1:100 000 scale. These products were used in this rapid assessment.

In order to accurately identify the remnants of natural vegetation within the Plettenberg Bay Municipality, an assessment of the different types of land-use were required at a finer scale than any currently available products. A new land-use information layer was therefore generated for the Plettenberg Bay Municipality at the 1: 25 000 scale using ArcGIS 8.0.

The current extent of natural habitat loss within the Plettenberg Bay Municipality was assessed. The explicit conservation targets for the biodiversity features of the municipality, as set by the STEP Project, were then used to determine the extent to which the remaining biodiversity features must be conserved in order to support the long-term ecological functioning and persistence of these habitats and to ensure adequate representivity of these features. The current conservation status of these remnants was then determined based on the results of the afore-mentioned process.

Vegetation Types

A total of three (3) biomes are present within the Plettenberg Bay Municipality, namely fynbos, subtropical thicket, and forest. These biomes within the Plettenberg Bay Municipality were sub-classified into finer-scale biodiversity surrogates (vegetation types) by the STEP Project (see Fig. 1) at the 1: 100 000 scale. However, in light of the highly heterogeneous nature of these vegetation types, a finer-scale assessment of these features is required at a minimum of 1: 20 000. The sub-classifications of the vegetation types identified by the STEP Project are as follows:



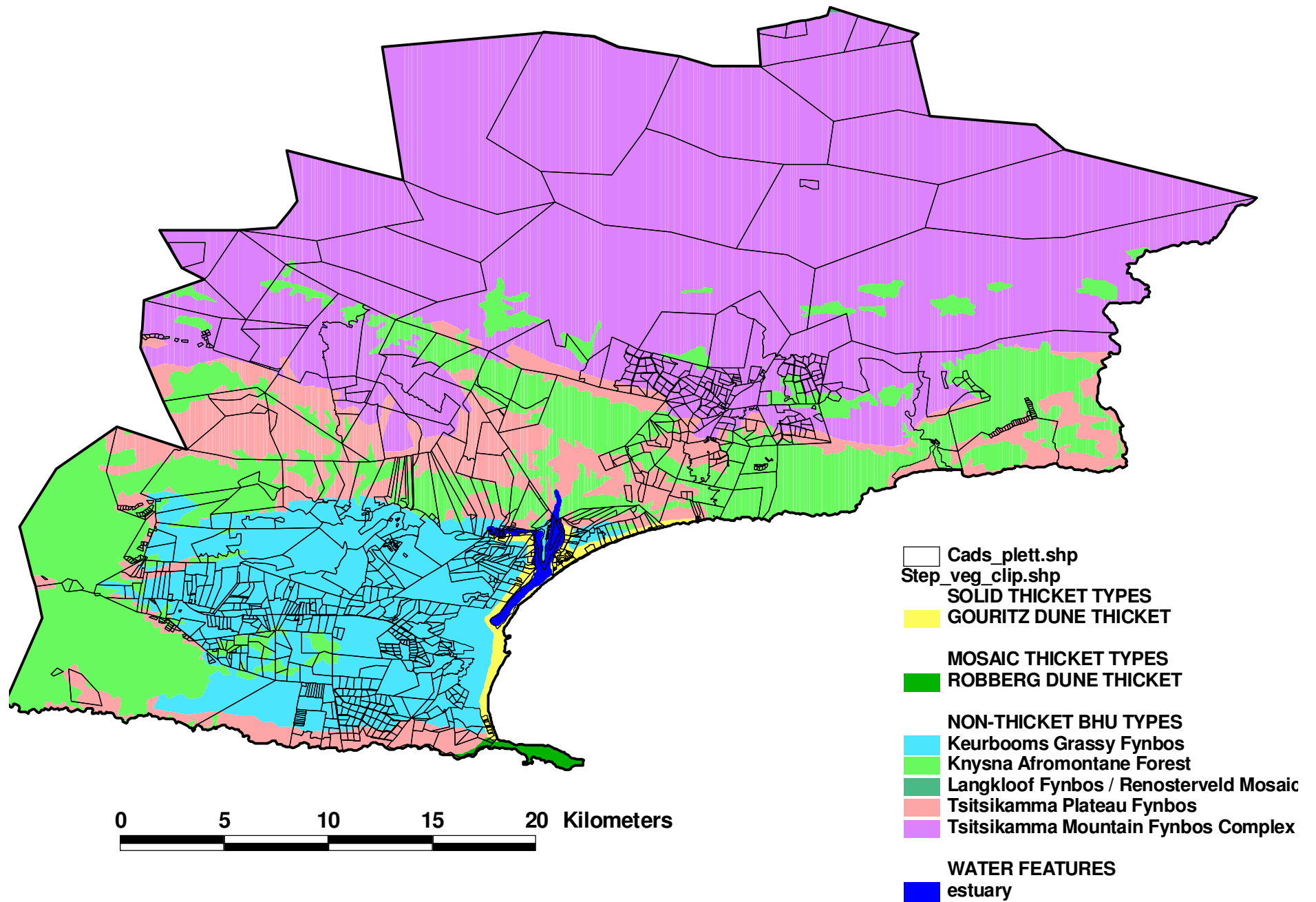


Figure 1. The natural vegetation of the Plettenberg Bay Municipality prior to development (STEP Report, 2003).

Land Use and Protected Areas

Current land use and protected areas are mapped in Figs 2 and 3 respectively.

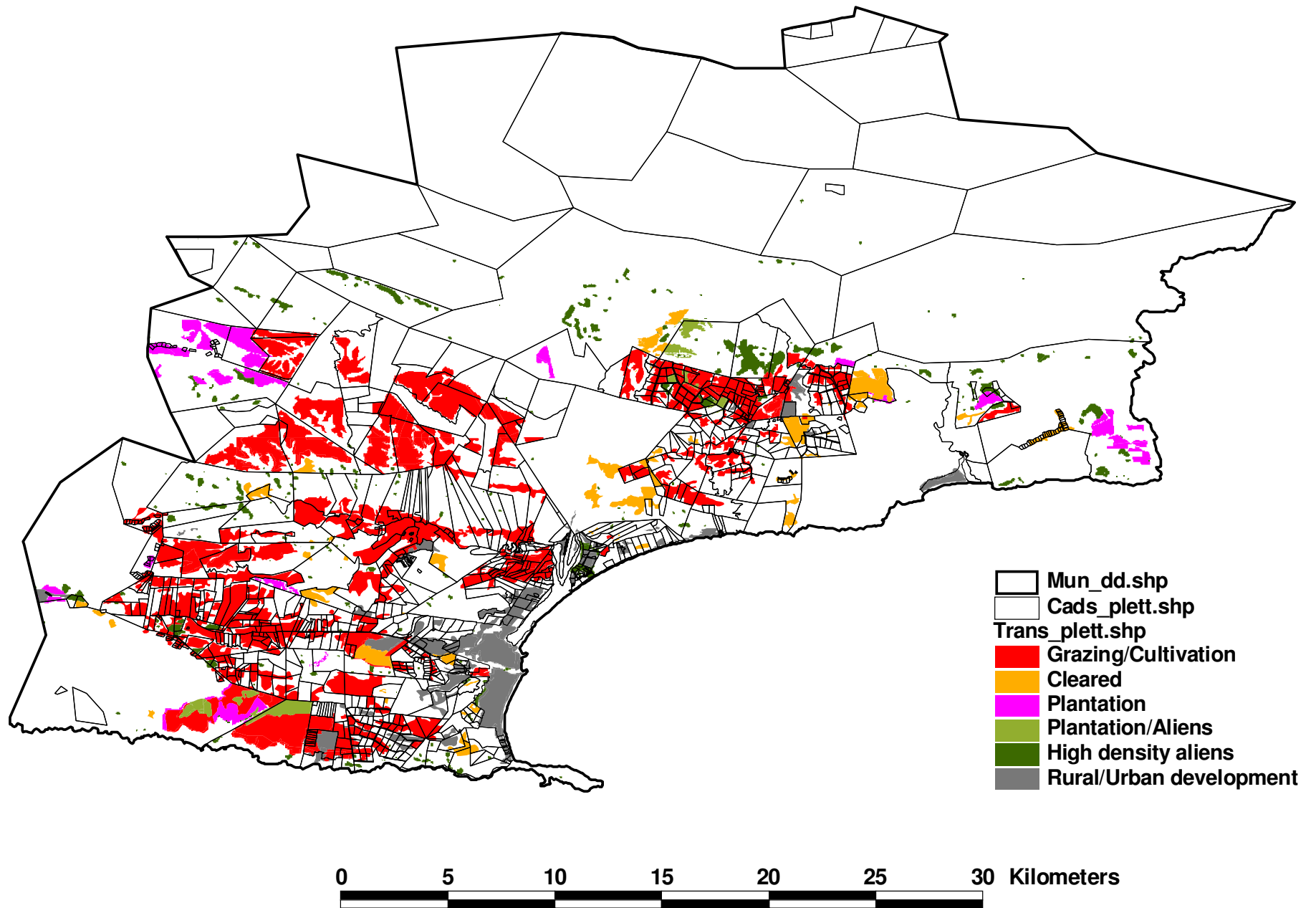


Figure 2. The distribution of land-use types in the Plettenberg Bay Municipality (1: 20 000).

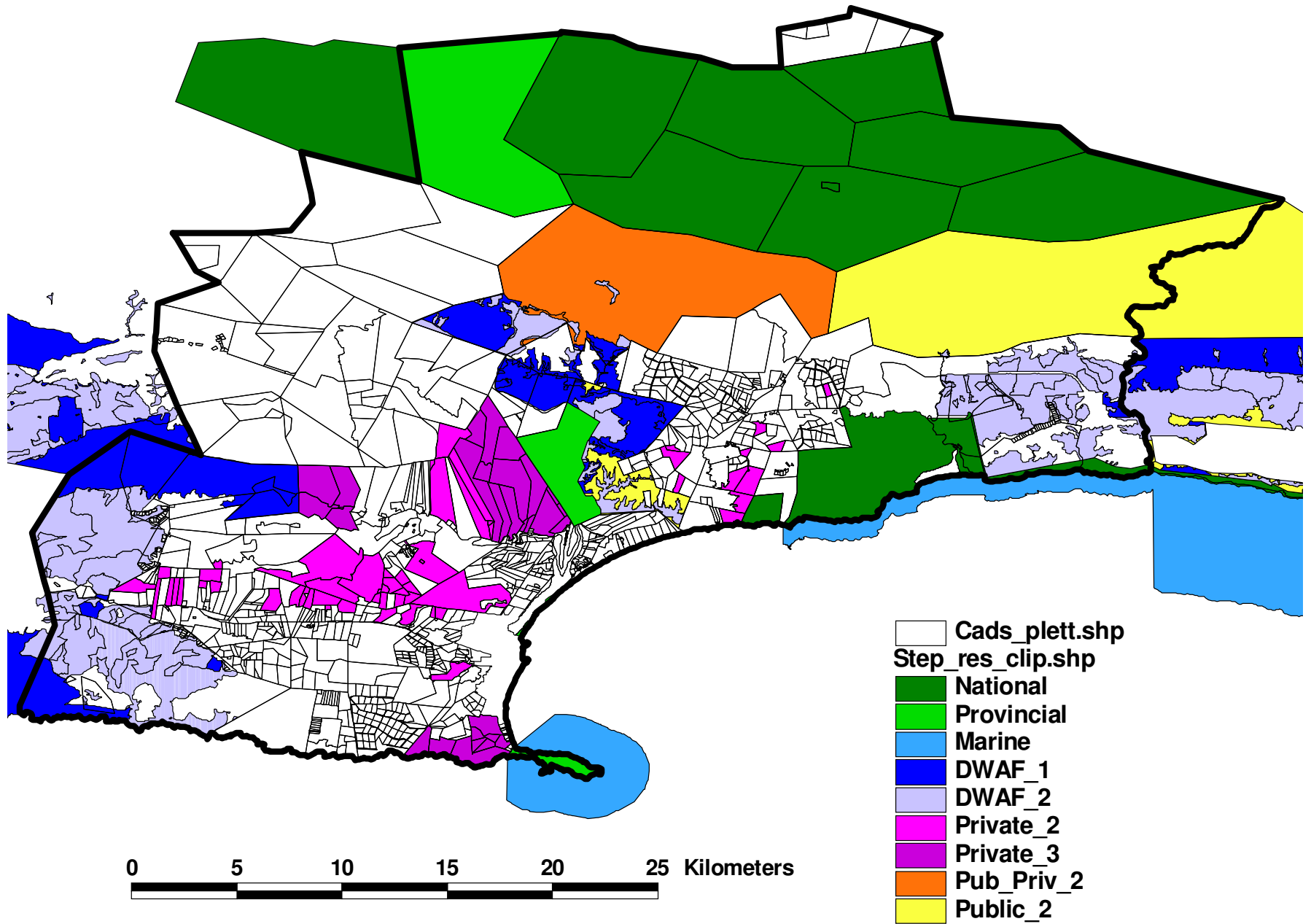


Figure 3. The existing protected area system within the Plettenberg Bay Municipality, including proposed conservancies.

Conservation Status

The vegetation types of the Plettenberg Bay Municipality were assessed in terms of the extent to which they are currently irreversibly developed, and their current remaining (extant) distribution. The explicit conservation targets for the biodiversity features of the municipality, as set by the STEP Project, were then used to determine the extent to which the remaining biodiversity features must be conserved in order to support the long-term ecological functioning and persistence, and to ensure adequate representivity, of these biodiversity features. The current conservation status of these remnants was then determined based on the results of the afore-mentioned process (see Fig. 4).

Table 1. The conservation status of the vegetation types of the Plettenberg Bay Municipality

Vegetation Type	Conservation Status
Keurbooms grassy fynbos	Vulnerable
Langkloof fynbos/rhenosterveld mosaic	Currently not Vulnerable
Tsitsikamma plateau fynbos	Vulnerable
Tsitsikamma mountain fynbos	Currently not Vulnerable
Gouritz dune thicket	Endangered
Robberg dune thicket	Endangered
Knysna afromontane forest	Critically Endangered
Estuary	Critically Endangered

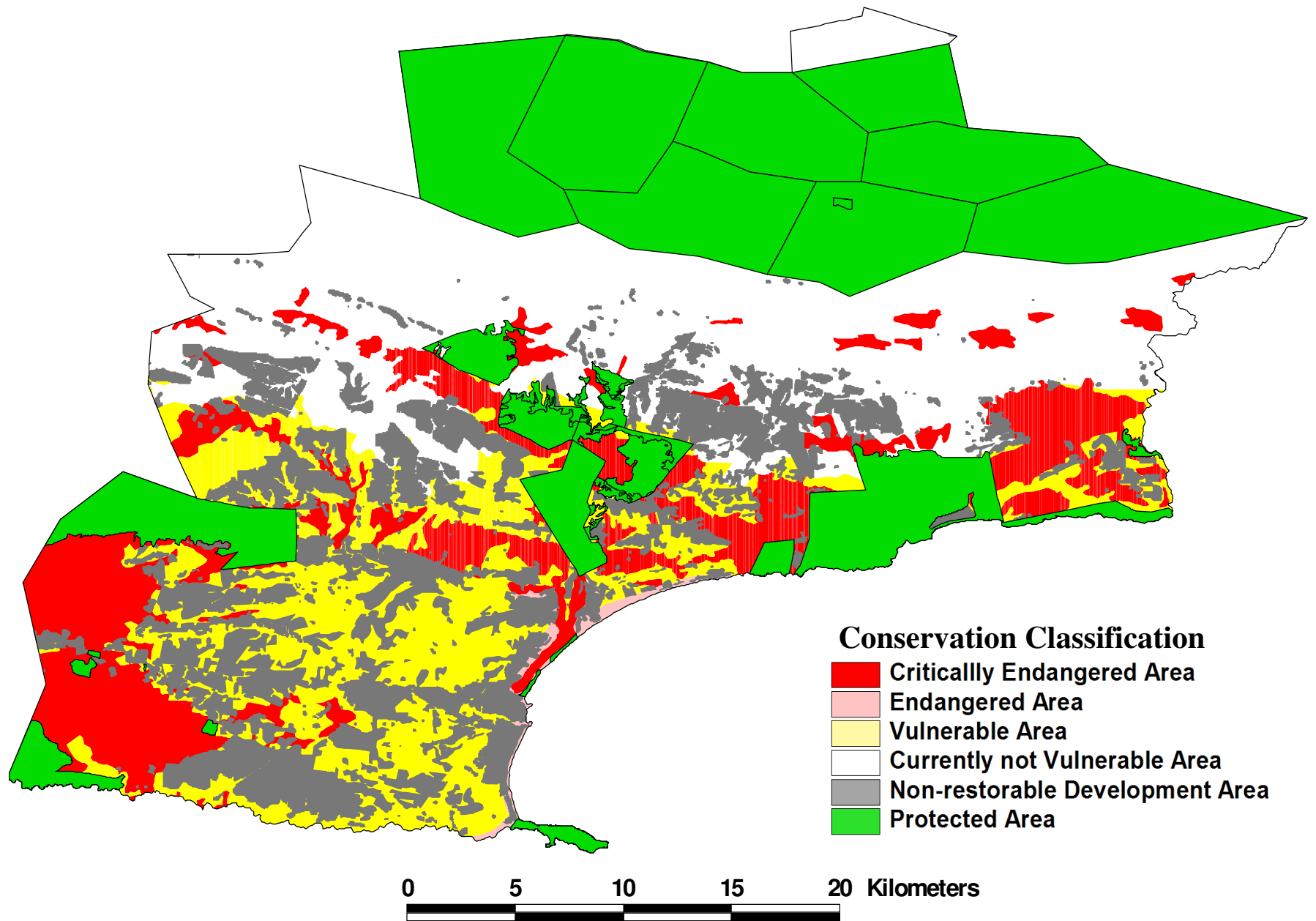


Figure 4. The conservation status of the Plettenberg Bay Municipality (Protected Areas illustrated are only statutory reserves with strong legal protection).

Towards Sustainable Development: A map of Land Use Opportunities and Recommendations, and Guidelines for Wise Land Use Decisions

This map (see Fig. 4) presents an efficient and practical strategy for safeguarding the biodiversity of the area shown. It is aimed at informing environmentally-wise land use decisions, in order to ensure sustainable development (Pierce, 2003).

	CONSERVATION CATEGORY ¹	BRIEF DESCRIPTION	LAND USE OPPORTUNITIES	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LAND USE	GUIDELINES FOR WISE LAND USE DECISIONS
	DEVELOPED (NON-RESTORABLE) AREAS	Natural areas destroyed or disturbed by human activities, including agriculture, urbanization and rural settlements, mines and quarries, high density alien invasive plants, forestry plantations and severe overgrazing.	Opportunities for job creation related to restoration and alien clearance.	Dependent on original biodiversity conservation category and intensity of impacts by urbanization, crop-farming, alien clearance, restoration etc. See relevant Guidelines in this Table.	On-site investigation ² to verify original biodiversity conservation category and to evaluate impacts ³ . Subsequent guidelines are dependent on biodiversity conservation category of original ecosystem, and evaluation of impacts ³ .

	<p align="center">IV CURRENTLY NOT VULNERABLE ECOSYSTEMS</p>	<p>Ecosystems which cover extensive areas which are still intact, healthy and are fully functional.</p>	<p>Activities such as housing, industry, crop-farming etc., preferably located on impacted or degraded areas.</p>	<p>Areas recommended for urbanisation, crop-farming etc.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. On-site investigation² to verify conservation category IV and to evaluate condition of ecosystem (relative to impacts)³. 2. If on-site investigations indicate conservation category III, II or I, then refer to relevant Recommendations and Guidelines in this Table. 3. Usual requirements for EIA⁴ apply for listed activities and for presence of listed Red Data Book plants and animals.
	<p align="center">III VULNERABLE ECOSYSTEMS</p>	<p>Ecosystems which cover moderate-sized areas that are still, healthy and are fully functional.</p>	<p>Activities with limited impacts such as sustainable stock-farming</p>	<p>Areas preferred for urbanisation, crop-farming etc. over areas categorised as II and I, but not preferred over areas categorised as IV.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. On-site investigation² to verify conservation category III and to evaluate condition of ecosystem (relative to impacts)³. 2. If on-site investigations indicate conservation category II, I, or IV, then refer to relevant Recommendations and Guidelines in this Table. 3. Usual requirements for EIA⁴ apply for listed activities and presence of listed Red Data Book plants and animals.

	<p align="center">II ENDANGERED ECOSYSTEMS</p>	<p>Ecosystems whose original extent has been severely reduced, and whose proper functioning is threatened and likely to become dysfunctional.</p>	<p>Eco-friendly, nature-based activities, such as game-based farming, responsible ecotourism, sustainable harvesting of natural products (hunting, reeds, honey production etc).</p>	<p>No further loss of natural ecosystem should be allowed unless there are net gains for conservation. Minimal activity to be allowed with compulsory net gains for conservation through mitigation (softening future impacts) and restoration of natural ecosystem.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. On-site investigation² to verify conservation category II and to evaluate condition of ecosystem (relative to impacts)³. 2. If on-site investigations indicate conservation category I, III or IV, then refer to relevant Recommendations and Guidelines in this Table. 3. Verification of conservation category II, and evaluation of habitat condition (relative to impacts) requires the minimum of a plan of Study for Scoping, clearly indicating alternative sites for activities, and including consideration of net gains for conservation through mitigation (softening future impacts) and restoration. 4. Net gains for conservation include restoration of impacted areas and establishment of private nature reserve on remainder of property. 5. Usual requirements for EIA⁴ apply for listed activities and presence of listed Red Data Book plants and animals.
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	<p style="text-align: center;">I</p> <p style="text-align: center;">CRITICALLY ENDANGERED ECOSYSTEMS</p>	<p>Ecosystems whose original extent has been reduced to an unacceptable level.</p> <p>This category also includes special ecosystems of limited extent, such as wetlands and natural forests.</p> <p>These areas are a conservation priority for sustainable development.</p>	<p>Eco-friendly, nature-based activities with minimal impacts, such as responsible ecotourism with walking trails.</p>	<p>No further loss of natural ecosystem and no impacts should be allowed unless there are major gains for conservation.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. On-site investigation² to verify conservation category I and to evaluate condition of ecosystem (relative to impacts)³. 2. If findings of on-site investigations indicate conservation category II, III or IV, then refer to relevant Recommendations and Guidelines in this Table. 3. Verification of conservation category I, and evaluation of habitat condition (relative to impacts) should lead to the strictest EIA⁴ procedure, clearly indicating the need for alternative siting of activities, and including consideration of major gains for conservation through mitigation (softening future impacts) and restoration. 4. Net gains for conservation include restoration of impacted areas and establishment of private nature reserve on remainder of property. 5. Usual requirements for EIA⁴ apply for listed activities and presence of listed Red Data Book plants and animals.
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	PROTECTED AREAS	Statutory nature reserves e.g. National parks, Provincial or local authority nature reserves	Conservation, ecotourism, cultural and environmental awareness, jobs related to eco-tourism	Strong conservation legislation	Area currently protected
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¹Information on categories, networks etc are explained in the STEP Handbook and the STEP Reports.

²On-site investigation by specialist consultant (biodiversity expert) is essential to ensure that the conservation categories presented on this map can be confirmed on the ground, This must involve the assessment and classification of the site's vegetation type/s, their conservation category, and the condition of the ecosystem/s. Conservation categories (I, II, III, IV) may be determined from the relevant tables in the STEP Technical Report Handbook (Descriptions of vegetation types, as well as their biodiversity conservation categories, are given in the STEP Technical Report).

³Evaluation of impacts should consider kind of impact (urbanisation, crop-farming, alien plant invasions), extent of impact (proportion of land impacted) and the intensity of impact (entirely impacted, in patches only etc). Taking into consideration of the original biodiversity conservation category, impact evaluation should lead to appropriate recommendation as follows: no or minimal impacts – follow Recommendations in Table; moderate impacts – restore wetlands or natural plants, or remove alien invasive plants; severe impacts e.g. extensive crop-farming – consider restoration, or allow high impact activities such as continued crop-farming, housing etc.

⁴ EIA - Environmental Impact Assessment. Strictest EIA means that conservation of biodiversity is a primary development goal e.g. nature-based activities such as a responsible eco-tourism, game farming etc..

⁵ Critical Ecological Process Areas were determined by computer analysis and expert input which identified and linked areas in the most efficient way, connecting protected areas (nature reserves) and including critical conservation areas, corridors and ecological processes, while avoiding areas of high agricultural productivity and areas highly impacted by urbanisation, overgrazing and alien plan invasions. The networks provide essential

pathways for the natural movement of animals and plants, for natural disturbances such as fire, and to accommodate nature's responses to changes in climate.

DISCLAIMER This map is not guaranteed to be free from error or omission. Therefore, WESSA, and their consultants disclaim liability for any act or omission made based on the information contained in this map, and for the consequences of any such acts or omissions.

NOTE Municipal officials will be required to abide by the national legislation of the Biodiversity Bill to be published by DEA&T (Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism) during 2003. This might mean limits to further loss of biodiversity; a "duty of care" for conserving endangered ecosystems, and restriction of activities according to the categorisation of the area (not just by listed activities). These would have implications for SDFs (Spatial Development Frameworks) and other land use planning instruments.

MAP DATED 13 January 2004.

Plettenberg Bay Broad Management Units (Protected Area Expansion Corridors)

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A number of potential corridors for the expansion of the existing protected area system within the Plettenberg Bay Municipality were identified (see Fig. 5). These notes and the proposed corridors are the result of a half-day workshop among the members listed. The corridors address only a first cut at the types of results that can be expected from a full, fine-scale conservation plan, which is urgently required for the entire Garden Route. There are many other areas within the Plettenberg Bay Municipality that require conservation attention, but these can be identified only with further fine-scale planning. Each of the corridors (Broad Management Units) identified above require further fine-scale planning within them, to identify exact boundaries, sensitive areas, and appropriate land use practices. The exact path that these corridors might follow is therefore still to be determined. For this reason the inclusion or exclusion of specific properties from these corridors should be treated as preliminary proposals requiring consultation with, and refinement by, the relevant landowners and conservation agencies.

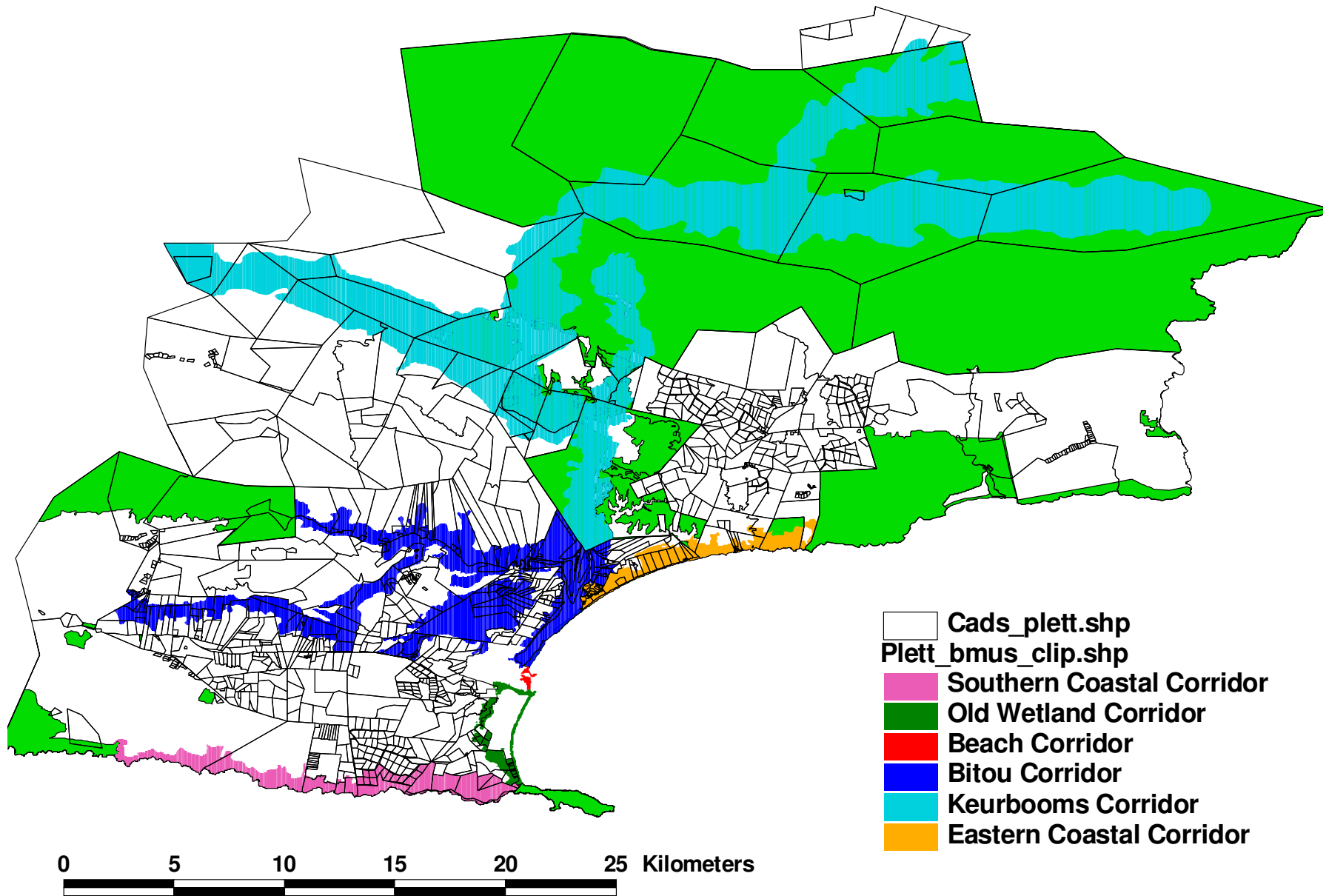


Figure 5. The proposed conservation corridors in the Plettenberg Bay Municipality to link existing statutory protected areas and to support the long-term functioning of ecological processes.

1. Southern Coastal Corridor

- This corridor is required to link Robberg Nature Reserve (WCNCB) and Sinclair Nature Reserve (DWAF).
- It will provide a faunal corridor for e.g. dispersal processes (Orange-breasted sunbirds, Lesser Double-collared sunbirds, Cape Sugarbirds *etc.*).
- It will provide an East-West gradient to capture the changes in vegetation along this gradient and to provide opportunities for the vegetation and associated faunal communities to track future changes in climate
- The vegetation within Robberg Nature Reserve is very different from the other vegetation types along this southern coast, so Robberg Nature Reserve alone is not sufficient to represent and protect these vegetation types.
- Plant endemism along this coastal corridor strip is high and is unconserved elsewhere, e.g. *Acmadenia alternifolia*.
- To the west of Kranshoek, the vegetation patterns are very different from those inland. Here there is a mosaic of forest and fynbos patches that exhibit unique processes, such as the effects of bushpigs on the vegetation, as they move in and out of the forests. Bushpigs are seed dispersal agents for several large fruit and seeds. They also control the growth of bracken fern, by eating the roots. This is the last remaining patch of coastal vegetation that functions in this manner, and previously the whole coast may have functioned similarly. This is a MUST for conservation.

2. Old Wetland Corridor

- This is the old course of the Piesang River, and includes the “vlei” behind the dunes at the base of Robberg (the former Piesang River estuary).
- Although this corridor runs through high density development at its northern end, as wide a strip as possible of natural vegetation should be maintained both along the beach, and in the interior, to allow the movement of plants and animals (especially birds), to link the northern corridors with the southern coastal one.

3. Beach Corridor

- A strip of natural vegetation must be maintained here to ensure the continued functioning of this dune system and to provide a linkage between the northern and southern corridors.

4. Bitou Corridor

- This corridor begins at the “Seemeeu Broeikolonie” of the Keurboomsrivier Nature Reserve managed by the WCNCB.
- It continues along the estuary of the Bitou and Keurbooms Rivers, to incorporate important wetlands. At the southern border of the Keurboomsrivier Nature Reserve, this corridor continues as the Keurbooms Corridor (see 5 below).
- The wetlands within this corridor are a MUST for conservation. Wetlands are important because the estuary depends on them for clean water and flood control. They are the most threatened natural habitats in South

Africa, are of the highest conservation status, and are protected by national legislation (Environment Conservation Act No. 73 of 1989). The corridor needs to buffer the Bitou River and the wetlands up to the 1:100 year flood line (this is about 2 m above the current water level).

- This corridor continues along the course of the Bitou River, and some of its perennial tributaries bisect the last remaining patches of Keurbooms Grassy Fynbos to the south. Keurbooms Grassy Fynbos is endemic (occurs nowhere else) to the Plettenberg Bay municipality and it has already been more than 52% transformed, placing it in the Vulnerable conservation status category. It is severely threatened by future development proposals.
- Within the Keurbooms Grassy Fynbos, the corridor also needs to capture important strips of lowland Coastal Forest (similar to that found along Groenvlei in the Goukamma Nature Reserve). Coastal Forest differs from Knysna Afromontane Forest in species composition. It is characterised by the presence of Essenhout (*Ekebergia capensis*) and the prominence of Cape Chestnut and Milkwood. Saffron and Candlewood are also present. This forest type has not been well studied and is severely threatened by coastal developments.
- The corridor continues to the western edge of the Petrus Brand Nature Reserve (DWAF), providing an East-West gradient across the municipality (from the mountains to the sea).
- This corridor must be linked to the Keurbooms Corridor through the private land at the confluence of the two rivers. Natural vegetation must be maintained here, with no activities that would threaten the adjacent wetlands or estuary. These private properties are a priority for an alien removal programme.

5. Keurbooms Corridor

- This corridor begins in the South at the border of the Bitou corridor, and provides a North-South upland-lowland gradient along the catchments of the Keurbooms and Palmiet Rivers. It thus provides a linkage between the mountains and the sea, and the coast and the inland.

- It is an important link between existing protected areas: Keurboomsrivier Nature Reserve (WCNCB), Whiskey Creek Nature Reserve (DWAF), other DWAF forests and the Soetkraal properties previously managed by SAN Parks.
- The corridor is important for the movement of some of the remaining large predators (e.g. Crowned Eagles, Black Eagles, leopards), as well as herbivores such as bushbuck (the largest antelope found in coastal bush).
- The corridor would also protect the water catchments of the Keurbooms and Palmiet Rivers, which would help to maintain a healthy estuary as well as water security for the Plettenberg Bay area.

6. Eastern Coastal Corridor

- This corridor is required to link the estuary complex to the Tsitsikamma National Park, through the Arch Rock Private Nature Reserve.
- There are important dunes (and associated dune vegetation such as Gouritz Dune Thicket and forest) along this coastal strip. These dunes are currently being built upon at a very rapid rate (the farm Matjes Fontein 304), despite advice to the contrary from the WCNCB. Any development along here should be set further inland behind the secondary dunes, and any remaining natural vegetation (which includes the Tsitsikamma Plateau Fynbos) should not be disturbed.
- This corridor will provide an East-West gradient (just like the Southern Coastal Corridor) and will link existing protected areas along the coast, all the way from the Sinclair Reserve in the West, to the Tsitsikamma National Park in the East, across the entire municipality. We are not aware of any other municipalities in South Africa that are attempting to achieve this.

All the corridors will contribute to the conservation of the last remaining areas of Gouritz Dune Thicket along the municipal coastline. This vegetation type has a conservation status of Endangered (just one step away from the highest conservation status, namely Critically Endangered).

Acronyms

WCNCB	Western Cape Nature Conservation Board
DWAF	Department of Water Affairs and Forestry
SAN Parks	South African National Parks

Conclusion

This rapid conservation assessment and framework for a conservation plan for the Plettenberg Bay Municipality has provided biodiversity information at a medium scale (1:25 000) for incorporation into the municipality's Spatial Development Framework. Furthermore, it has sought to illustrate the distribution and conservation status of natural vegetation remnants in the Plettenberg Bay Municipality, to identify potential corridors for the expansion of the Plettenberg Bay Protected Area System, to illustrate the potential types of products that a comprehensive fine-scale conservation plan for the Plettenberg Bay Municipality would generate, and to serve as an interim conservation assessment and plan until the completion of a comprehensive fine-scale plan for the municipality.

It must be noted that such biodiversity and land-use information is required at a fine-scale (1:10 000) in order to adequately inform land-use decision-making at the local authority level, particularly within an urban context. All information provided herein must therefore be verified by site visits in order to confirm the accuracy of this data, until a comprehensive fine-scale conservation plan has been completed for the municipality.

Furthermore, the proposed corridors for the expansion of the Plettenberg Bay protected area system should be viewed as proposals for discussion, and should not be treated as final products, as further refinement of the exact boundaries of such corridors must be undertaken as part of a fine-scale conservation planning exercise that will include consultation with relevant landowners and conservation agencies.

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Data

All data illustrated in this report are provided as an ArcView 3.2 project (*plett_rapid_cons_plan.apr*), with all associated files provided within this project. In order to view the data with the fields colour-coded appropriately, please copy the folder ***Plett_Rapid_Cons_Plan*** provided on this CD directly onto the root directory of your C-Drive (i.e. C:_Plett_Rapid_Cons_Plan). Then open ArcView 3.2 and open the project file (*plett_rapid_cons_plan.apr*) from C:\Plett_Rapid_Cons_Plan.